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Humanities

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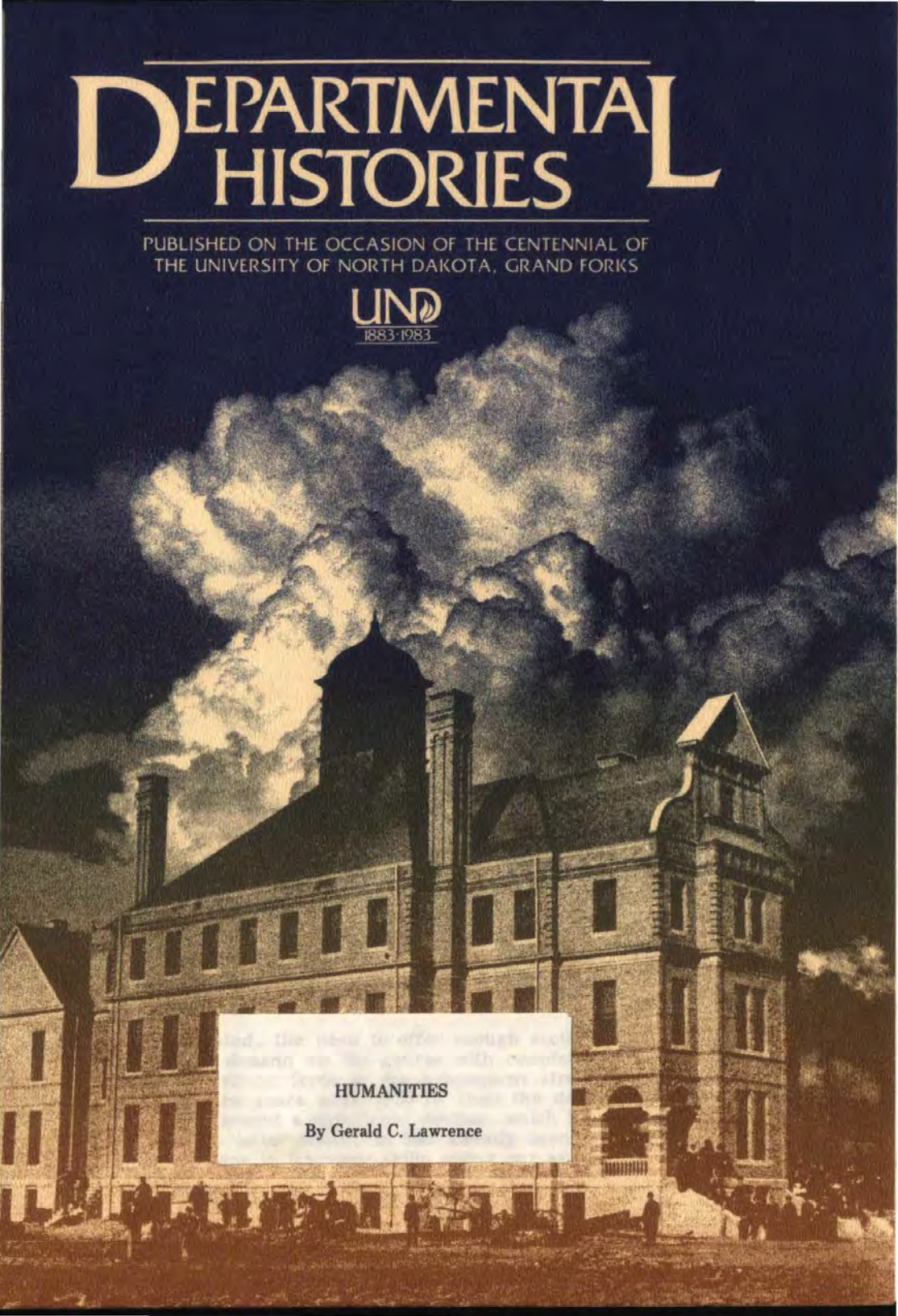

HUMANITIES

By Gerald C. Lawrence

HISTORY OF HUMANITIES PROGRAM

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The Humanities Program at the University of North Dakota came into existence in 1967 through an action of the University Senate and under the direction of Jackson P. Hershbell. The structure of the program was dictated by a number of factors. It had been decided that there must be both lecture and discussion components to the course, and each Humanities discipline/ department on campus assumed an obligation to contribute staff to the program, who would act as leaders of discussion groups, or as lecturers, or both. Discussion leaders were also recruited from faculty of other than humanistic disciplines.

This made for a large and heterogeneous group of faculty, and the unity of the program, which was to be maintained by the coordinator through weekly faculty meetings, was very difficult to achieve, if not impossible. In one meeting for instance, a venerable faculty member consumed the entire meeting wth a series of quips and expostulations in Latin which were amusing even to those who understood no Latin (the vast majority), but certainly added nothing to any common sense of purpose regarding the teaching of the course. I suspect that the barrage of Latin was intended, subtly, to express that venerable faculty member's feeling that such a group, ignorant of the language of the classical humanists, had no business doing what they were presumably doing. He may have been correct, since within a few years the participating faculty had, except for a very few, returned to their respective disciplines.

Throughout this period, from 1967 to 1970, the teaching within the course had one major objective, to familiarize the students with a selection of classical works in the Humanities. This objective was predicated on the assumption that our students were "traditional" students who could deal with the assigned works in a straight-forward manner. This assumption was not too far from reality at that time, but since then, over the course of the last 12 years has become progressively less valid.

In the early 70's the number of graduates and undergraduates in the Humanities disciplines rose to such heights that there was good reason for the faculty contributions to the Humanities Program to be pulled back into disciplinary offerings. At the same time, enrollments in the Humanities Program itself began to climb. The influence of Viet Nam, the student rebelliousness expressing itself in the counter-culture, and the general expansiveness of the educational atmosphere all seemed to contribute to an increased student demand for humanistic studies.

The problem this created, the need to offer enough sections of Humanities 101, and 102 to meet the demand or the course with completely inadequate faculty resources, was the driving force in the subsequent structural changes in the program throughout the years until 1976-77 when the demand for and interest in the Humanities underwent a significant decline, which has continued until the present. Behind this latter trend, as has already been suggested, there has been a significant decline in language skills among our students that is

naturally accompanied by, or the result of, a conviction that such skills are irrelevant to the material success that is the sole motivation of most contemporary students.

In 1970, however, there were plenty of interested students, and essentially no faculty available to teach them. The program reacted to this situation by simply recruiting interested townsmen and some advanced undergraduate students to take up the load. At the same time it was necessary to move to more contemporary expressions of humanistic thought in the curriculum. Since the program was attempting to operate with good will and enthusiasm rather than depth of learning and teaching experience, its treatment of the arts had to change along with its reading list. In place of systematic lectures on art and music, students were required to undertake "projects," to, presumably, experience for themselves the creative process.

One of the more amusing aspects of this period, in retrospect, was the system (?) of record-keeping by which the coordinators office attempted to keep track of the credit awarded for student projects. A form (contract) was created, in triplicate, that was to be filled out by each student and signed by his instructor to verify the "points" awarded. The Humanities office was virtually over-flowing with these contracts by the close of each semester, and the work-study girls who handled them were often reduced either to tears or helpless laughter when the rubber bands containing a large number of contracts broke or some similar mishap occurred to cause numbers of contracts to get loose.

The "project-era" was, however, not a total loss. Many fine things were done that stood out from the dull array of collages and decorated wine bottles that were the common student response to artistic challenge. The annual "Humanities Fair" of these years regularly contained some interesting and unusual items, ranging from multi-media shows to pieces of sculpture.

In the course of this period of adjustment to large numbers of students and a small and shifting faculty, the lecture program was dropped in favor of what were called "cultural events." This has been a relatively constant and highly successful feature of the program for many years now, and is quite simple to operate. Each student attends from eight to fourteen such events each semester, depending on the grade he or she is aiming for, and reports on them through a brief essay. Thus many students who have never seen or heard a symphony performance, or attended any theatre except their senior class play, or witnessed a ballet were induced to experience such things, and more often than not were pleasantly surprised.

By 1974 a number of things had happened to give the Humanities Program unity and direction. First, there was, by then, a core Humanities faculty consisting of professors Glassheim, Lawrence, Rand, and Wills, who were normally joined by one or two other faculty persons. Also, at this time, there were enough upperclassmen in the Humanities disciplines, with enough interest in the Humanities, that such students could be regularly incorporated into the program as discussion leaders. The faculty's mission was then to teach the discussion leaders and to supervise their classes. All Humanities classes were organized into "clusters" consisting of four sections of fifteen students each. Cluster meetings each week planned teaching strategies and discussed the content of the weeks assignment. This arrangement worked quite well for a number of

years, but the arrangement precluded the study of "classical" works in the Humanities and necessarily tilted the program towards the experiential and away from the traditional academic content.

By 1976-77 a number of trends began to coalesce and brought about another significant change in the organization and sense of purpose of the Humanities Program. Student activism and accompanying interest in the Humanities dropped to the point where recruitment of student discussion leaders became difficult, and then impossible. At the same time, criticism of the programs "experiential" orientation resulted in a number of external evaluations of the program, the most thorough of which, recommended a return to a more "content oriented" curriculum. Also, projections of declining enrollment, and actual declines in the numbers of majors in the humanities disciplines, occasioned a renewed interest in general education requirements in the Humanities and Fine Arts area on the part of the disciplinary departments in that area. All of these influences added up to a decision on the part of the Humanities Program staff to reduce the size of the program to just that number of sections that could be taught by the core faculty and to return, as much as possible to the study of the classics. This sort of change would also allow the faculty to be more directly involved in dealing with the problem, aluded to above, of declining language skills among entering students.

The present structure of the program reflects its entire development; the only element of structure that has been completely dropped is the student creative "project," but even that in a sense exists as creative writing in the form of "fictional autobiographies" which our students write as one form of response to the works studied. The experential aspect of the program has been maintained, but it is now balanced against a stronger content, both in terms of the works read and in terms of the presence of experienced and dedicated faculty persons in each class. Further, the Fall semester each year is devoted to development of a theme of contemporary interest (this year, the theme is the idea of money) and the spring semester to Greek classics.

The physical, geographical movement of the Humanities Program on campus is a matter of some interest and almost corresponds with other developments of the program. During the years of maximum size of the program, and when it was first attempting to cope with its peculiar problems, the program was lodged in a single office in the basement of Merrifield Hall. At the stage when core faculty and cluster organization characterized the program, it was housed in Budge basement and acquired its own classroom, as well as some sound and video equipment. In the spring of '81, fire and flood ruined Budge Hall and forced the program into temporary quarters in the old Industrial Technology building. This Fall the program moved into its present, relatively luxurious quarters on the third floor of Babcock Hall, where space for both offices and classroom are suited to its current needs.

Thus, for a variety of reasons, the Humanities Program has reached a stage in its development where it knows what it wishes to accomplish with regard to the present generation of entering students, and has a method and a course content well suited to that end. As the preceding narrative has suggested, the Humanities Program has had to adapt itself to varying conditions throughout its entire existence, and because of the varying size and quality of its "staff," has had to pay special attention to its students, at least in terms of continually asking the questions "what can we teach?" and "what can our students learn?"

Also, the emphasis placed on class discussion and the difficulties which this has posed have forced the Humanities faculty to explore many techniques and class formats with the aim of finding the proper "atmosphere" for the easy interchange of ideas and the awakening of the capacity for critical thought.

While it is not possible to assert that any magic formula has been found that will ensure success in these aims, the program has come to understand that the naure of the difficulty that it faces and attempts to overcome lies in a certain obvious quality of its students. By and large they simply do not have any sense of their own identity and are thus simply drifting, "going with the flow" as it were, and operating on the assumption that the possession of a diploma will eventually give them access to a material affluence whose conditions and human significance remain unknown and unquestioned.

The program attempts to force, gently and supportively, its students into recognition and expression of their own feelings and thoughts, into presentation of themselves through class participation and writing. It further attempts to force them to the reognition that they are embedded in a culture that is deeply problematical and, by its nature, historical, so that they come to see themselves in the same light.

Beyond that, through its semester on the Greeks, the program attempts to give its students a sense of human profundity and a feeling for some of the great themes that run through human existence, so that the initial dismay arising from the first recognition of the self in a difficult world is countered by a new sense of human possibility as a possibility that is just as real in the present as it was for the heroes of antiquity.

The works that make up the course syllabi and the students are the two poles of the dialogue that the Humanities Program intends to be. The faculty role is merely to facilitate this dialogue, of which it, itself, is a product. Perhaps more important than any other feature of the brief history of the program is the effect of the years of reading and teaching in the Humanities on the members of its faculty. All are at home with the paradoxical, the tragic, and the comic, and all are both as new and as old as the tradition they represent.